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LETTERS
ON
CHIVALRY
AND
ROMANCE.

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LETTERS

ON

CHIVALRY

AND

ROMANCE.

Guarda, che mal fato,
O giovenil vaghezza non ti meni
Al magazino de le ciancie. ah fuggi,
Fuggi quell incantato alloggiamento.
Quivi habitan le maghe, che incantando
Fan traveder, e traudir ciaſcuno.

TASSO.

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LETTERS ON CHIVALRY.

LETTER I.

THE ages, we call barbarous, preſent us with many a ſubject of curious ſpeculation. What, for inſtance, is more remarkable than the Gothic CHIVALRY? or than the ſpirit of ROMANCE, which took its riſe from that ſingular inſtitution?

Nothing in human nature, my dear friend, is without its reaſons. The modes

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and fashions of different times may appear, at first sight, fantastic and unaccountable. But they, who look nearly into them, discover some latent cause of their production.

"Nature once known, no prodigies remain,"

as sings our philosophical bard; but to come at this knowledge, is the difficulty. Sometimes a close attention to the workings of the human mind is sufficient to lead us to it: Sometimes more than that, the diligent observation of what passes without us, is necessary.

This last I take to be the case here. The prodigies, we are now considering, had their origin in the barbarous ages. Why then, says the fastidious modern, look any farther for the reason? Why not resolve them at once into the usual caprice and absurdity of barbarians?

This,

This, you ſee, is a ſhort and commodious philoſophy. Yet barbarians have their *own*, ſuch as it is, if they are not enlightened by our reaſon. Shall we then condemn them unheard, or will it not be fair to let them have the telling of their own ſtory?

Would we know, from what cauſes the inſtitution of *Chivalry* was derived? The time of its birth, the ſituation of the barbarians, amongſt whom it aroſe, muſt be conſidered: their wants, deſigns, and policies muſt be explored: We muſt inquire when, and where, and how it came to paſs that the weſtern world became familiarized to this *Prodigy*, which we now ſtart at.

Another thing is full as remarkable, and concerns us more nearly. The ſpirit of Chivalry, was a fire which ſoon

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ſpent itſelf: But that of *Romance*, which was kindled at it, burnt long, and continued its light and heat even to the politer ages.

The greateſt geniuſes of our own and foreign countries, ſuch as Arioſto and Taſſo in Italy, and Spenſer and Milton in England, were ſeduced by theſe barbarities of their forefathers; were even charmed by the Gothic Romances. Was this caprice and abſurdity in them? Or, may there not be ſomething in the Gothic Romance peculiarly ſuited to the views of a genius, and to the ends of poetry? And may not the philoſophic moderns have gone too far, in their perpetual ridicule and contempt of it?

To form a judgment in the caſe, the riſe, progreſs, and genius of Gothic Chivalry muſt be explained.

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The circumſtances in the Gothic fictions and manners, which are proper to the ends of poetry (if any ſuch there be) muſt be pointed out.

Reaſons, for the decline and rejection of the Gothic taſte in later times muſt be given.

You have in theſe particulars both the SUBJECT, and the PLAN of the following Letters.

LETTER II.

I Look upon Chivalry, as on ſome mighty River, which the fablings of the poets have made immortal. It may have ſprung up amidſt rude rocks, and blind deſerts. But the noiſe and rapidity of its courſe, the extent of country it adorns, and the towns and

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palaces it ennobles, may lead a traveller out of his way and invite him to take a view of thoſe dark caverns,

unde ſuperne
Plurimus Eridani per ſylvam volvitur amnis.

I enter, without more words, on the ſubject I began to open to you in my laſt Letter.

The old inhabitants of theſe North-Weſt parts of Europe were extremely given to the love and exerciſe of arms. The feats of Charlemagne and our Arthur, in particular, were ſo famous as in later times, when books of Chivalry were compoſed, to afford a principal ſubject to the writers of them.

But CHIVALRY, properly ſo called, and under the idea "of a diſtinct mili-"tary order, conferred in the way of "inveſt-

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"investiture, and accompanied with "the ſolemnity of an oath and other "ceremonies, as deſcribed in the old "hiſtorians and romancers," was of later date, and ſeems to have ſprung immediately out of the FEUDAL CONSTITUTION.

The FIRST and moſt ſenſible effect of this conſtitution, which brought about ſo mighty a change in the policies of Europe, was the erection of a prodigious number of petty tyrannies. For, though the great barons were cloſely tied to the ſervice of their Prince by the conditions of their tenure, yet the power which was given them by it over their own numerous vaſſals was ſo great, that, in effect, they all ſet up for themſelves; affected an independency; and were, in truth, a ſort of abſolute Sovereigns, at leaſt with regard to one another. Hence, their mutual

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aims and intereſts often interfering, the feudal ſtate was, in a good degree, a ſtate of war: the feudal chiefs were in frequent enmity with each other: the ſeveral combinations of feudal tenants were ſo many ſeparate armies under their head or chief: and their caſtles were ſo many fortreſſes, as well as palaces, of theſe puny princes.

In this ſtate of things one ſees, that all imaginable encouragement was to be given to the uſe of arms, under every different form of attack and defence, according as the ſafety of theſe different communities, or the ambition of their leaders, might require. And this condition of the times, I ſuppoſe, gave riſe to that military inſtitution, which we know by the name of CHIVALRY.

FURTHER, there being little or no ſecurity to be had amidſt ſo many reſtleſs

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less spirits and the clashing views of a neighbouring numerous and independent nobility, the military discipline of their followers, even in the intervals of peace, was not to be relaxed, and their ardour suffered to grow cool by a total disuse of martial exercises. And hence the proper origin of JUSTS and TURNAMENTS; those images of war, which were kept up in the castles of the barons and, by an useful policy, converted into the amusement of the knights, when their arms were employed on no serious occasion.

I call this the *proper origin* of Justs and Turnaments; for the date of them is carried no higher, as far as I can find even in France (where unquestionably they made their first appearance) than the year 1066; which was not till after the introduction of the feudal government into that country. Soon after, in-

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deed, we find them in England and in Germany; but not till the feudal policy had ſpread itſelf in thoſe parts and had prepared the way for them.

You ſee, then, my notion is, that Chivalry was no abſurd and freakiſh inſtitution, but the natural and even ſober effect of the feudal policy; whoſe turbulent genius breathed nothing but war, and was fierce and military even in its amuſements.

I leave you to revolve this idea in your own mind. You will find, I believe, a reaſonable foundation for it in the hiſtory of the feudal times, and in the ſpirit of the feudal government.

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LETTER III.

IF the conjecture, I advanced, of the riſe of Chivalry, from the circumſtances of the feudal government, be thought reaſonable, it will now be eaſy to account for the ſeveral CHARACTERISTICS of this ſingular profeſſion.

I. "The paſſion for arms; the "ſpirit of enterprize; the honour of "knighthood; the rewards of valour; "the ſplendour of equipages;" in ſhort, every thing that raiſes our ideas of the proweſs, gallantry, and magnificence of theſe ſons of Mars is naturally and eaſily explained on this ſuppoſition.

Ambition, intereſt, glory all concurred, under ſuch circumſtances, to produce theſe effects. The feudal principles could terminate in nothing elſe.

And

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And when, by the neceſſary operation of that policy, this turn was given to the thoughts and paſſions of men, uſe and faſhion would do the reſt; and carry them to all the exceſſes of military fanaticiſm, which are painted ſo ſtrongly, but ſcarcely exaggerated in the old Romances.

For inſtance, one of the ſtrangeſt circumſtances in thoſe books, and which looks moſt like a mere extravagance of the imagination, is that of the *women-warriors*, with which they all abound. Butler in his Hudibras, who ſaw it in this light, ridicules it, as a moſt unnatural idea, with great ſpirit. Yet in this repreſentation they did but copy from the manners of the times. Anna Comnena tells us, in the life of her father, that the wife of Robert the Norman fought ſide by ſide with her huſband, in his battles; that ſhe would rally

rally the flying ſoldiers, and lead them back to the charge: And Nicetas obſerves that, in the time of Manuel Comnena, there were in one Cruſade many women, armed like men, and on horſeback.

What think you now of Taſſo's Clorinda, whoſe prodigies of valour I dare ſay you have often laughed at? Or, rather, what think you of that conſtant pair,

"Gildippe, & Odoardo amanti e ſpoſi,
"In valor d'arme, e in lealtà famoſi?"
C. iii. S. 40.

II. "Their romantic ideas of juſtice; "their paſſion for adventures; their "eagerneſs to run to the ſuccour of "the diſtreſſed; and the pride they "took in redreſſing wrongs, and re"moving grievances;" All theſe diſtinguiſhing

guiſhing characters of genuine Chivalry are explained on the ſame principle. For, the feudal ſtate being a ſtate of war, or rather of almoſt perpetual violence, rapine, and plunder, it was unavoidable that, in their conſtant ſkirmiſhes, ſtratagems, and ſurprizes, numbers of the tenants or followers of one Baron ſhould be ſeized upon and carried away by the followers of another: And the intereſt, each had to protect his own, would of courſe introduce the point of honour in attempting by all means not only to retaliate on the enemy, but to reſcue the captive ſufferers out of the hands of their oppreſſors.

It would be meritorious, in the higheſt degree, to fly to their aſſiſtance, when they knew where they were to be come at; or to ſeek them out with diligence, when they did not. This laſt ſervice they called, *Going in queſt of adventures*; which

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which at first, no doubt, was confined to those of their own party, but afterwards, by the habit of acting on this principle, would be extended much farther. So that, in process of time, we find the Knights errant, as they were now properly styled, wandering the world over in search of occasions on which to exercise their generous and disinterested valour,

Ecco quei, che le charte empion di sogni,
Lancilotto, Tristano, e gli altri erranti.

III. "The courtesy, affability, and "gallantry, for which these adventurers "were so famous, are but the natural "effects and consequences of their si-"tuation."

For the castles of the Barons were, as I said, the courts of these little sovereigns, as well as their fortresses; and the

the resort of their vassals thither, in honour of their chiefs, and for their own proper security, would make that civility and politeness, which is seen in courts and insensibly prevails there, a predominant part in the character of these assemblies.

This is the poet's own account of

- - - - court and royal citadel,
The great school-maistresse of all Courtesy.
B. III. C. vi. St. 1.

And again, more largely in B. VI. C. i. S. 1.

Of Court it seems men Courtesie doe call,
For that it there most useth to abound;
And well beseemeth that in Princes hall
That Virtue should be plentifully found,
Which of all goodly manners is the ground
And roote of civil conversation:
Right so in *faery court* it did resound,
Where courteous knights and ladies most did won
Of all on earth, and made a matchless paragon.

For

For *Faery Court* means the *reign of Chivalry*; which, it ſeems, had undergone a fatal revolution before the age of Milton, who tells us that *Courteſy*

> - - - is ſooner found in lonely ſheds
> With ſmoaky rafters, than in tap'ſtry halls
> And courts of princes, where it firſt was nam'd,
> And yet is moſt pretended. MASK.

Further, The free commerce of the ladies, in thoſe knots and circles of the great, would operate ſo far on the ſturdieſt knights as to give birth to the attentions of gallantry. But this gallantry would take a refined turn, not only from the neceſſity there was of maintaining the ſtrict forms of decorum, amidſt a promiſcuous converſation under the eye of the Prince and in his own family; but alſo from the inflamed ſenſe they muſt needs have of the frequent outrages committed by their neighbouring clans of ad-

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verſaries, on the honour of the Sex, when by chance of war they had fallen into their hands. Violations of chaſtity being the moſt atrocious crimes they had to charge on their enemies, they would pride themſelves in the glory of being its protectors: And as this virtue was, of all others, the faireſt and ſtrongeſt claim of the ſex itſelf to ſuch protection, it is no wonder that the notions of it were, in time, carried to ſo platonic an elevation.

Thus, again, the great maſter of Chivalry himſelf, on this ſubject,

It hath been thro' all ages ever ſeen,
That, with the praiſe of arms and chivalry,
The prize of beauty ſtill hath joined been;
And that for reaſon's ſpecial privity:
For either doth on other much rely;
For HE mee ſeems moſt fit the fair to ſerve,
That can her beſt defend from villany;
And SHE moſt fit his ſervice doth deſerve,
That faireſt is, and from her faith will never ſwerve.

SPENSER B. IV. C. V.

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Not but the foundation of this refined gallantry was laid in the antient manners of the German nations. Cæsar tells us how far they carried their practice of chastity, which he seems willing to account for on political principles. However that be, their consideration of the sex was prodigious, as we see in the history of their irruptions into the Empire; where, among all their ravages and devastations of other sorts, we find they religiously abstained from offering any violence to the honour of the women.

IV. It only remains to account for that "character of Religion," which was so deeply imprinted on the minds of all knights and was essential to their institution. We are even told, that *the love of God and of the Ladies* went hand in hand, in the duties and ritual of Chivalry.

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Two reaſons may be aſſigned for this ſingularity,

Firſt, the ſuperſtition of the Times, in which Chivalry aroſe; which was ſo great that no inſtitution of a public nature could have found credit in the world, that was not conſecrated by the Churchmen, and cloſely interwoven with religion.

Secondly, the condition of the Chriſtian world; which had been harraſſed by long wars, and had but juſt recovered a breathing-time from the brutal ravages of the Saracen armies. The remembrance of what they had lately ſuffered from theſe grand enemies of the faith, made it natural and even neceſſary to engage a new military order on the ſide of religion.

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And how warmly this principle, *a zeal for the faith*, was acted upon by the profeſſors of Chivalry, and how deeply it entered into their ideas of the military Character, we ſee from the term ſo conſtantly uſed by the old Romancers, of RECREANT Knight; by which they meant to expreſs, with the utmoſt force, their diſdain of a daſtard or vanquiſhed knight. For many of this order falling into the hands of the Saracens, ſuch of them as had not imbibed the full Spirit of their profeſſion, were induced to renounce their faith, in order to regain their liberty. Theſe men, as ſinning againſt the great fundamental laws of Chivalry, they branded with this name; a name of complicated reproach, which implied a want of the two moſt eſſential qualities of a Knight, COURAGE and FAITH.

And here, by the way, the reaſon ap-

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pears why the Spaniards, of all the Europeans, were furthest gone in every characteristic madness of true chivalry. To all the other considerations, here mentioned, their fanaticism in every way was especially instigated and kept alive by the memory and neighbourhood of their old infidel invaders.

And thus we seem to have a fair account of that PROWESS, GENEROSITY, GALANTRY, and RELIGION, which were the peculiar and vaunted characteristics of the purer ages of Chivalry.

Such was the state of things in the western World, when the crusades to the holy land were set on foot. Whence we see how well prepared the minds of men were for engaging in that enterprize. Every object, that had entered into the views of the institutors of chivalry, and had been followed by it's professors, was

now

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now at hand to inflame the military and religious ardor of the knights, to the utmoſt. And here, in fact, we find the ſtrongeſt and boldeſt features of their genuine character: *Daring* to madneſs, in enterprizes of hazard: Burning with zeal for the delivery of the *oppreſſed*; and, which was deemed the height of *religious* merit, for the reſcue of the holy city out of the hands of infidels: And, laſtly exalting their honour of *chaſtity* ſo high as to profeſs celibacy; as they conſtantly did, in the ſeveral orders of knighthood created on that extravagant occaſion.

LETTER IV.

WHAT think you, my good friend, of my laſt learned Letter? Don't you begin to favour this conjecture, as whimſical as it may ſeem, of *the riſe and genius* of knight-errantry?

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But you aſk me, where I learned the ſeveral particulars, on which I form this profound ſyſtem. You are willing, I perceive, to advance on ſure grounds; and call upon me to point out to you the authorities, from which I pretend to have collected the ſeveral marks and characteriſtics of true chivalry.

Your requeſt is reaſonable, and I acknowledge the omiſſion in not acquainting you that my information was taken from it's proper Source, the *old Romances*. Not that I ſhall make a merit with you in having peruſed theſe barbarous volumes my ſelf; much leſs would I impoſe the ungrateful taſk upon you. Thanks to the curioſity of certain painful collectors, this knowledge may be obtained at a cheaper rate. And I think it ſufficient to refer you to a learned and very elaborate Memoir of a French writer,

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ter, who has put together all that is requiſite to be known on this ſubject. Materials are firſt laid in, before the Architect goes to work; and if the ſtructure, I am here raiſing out of them, be to your mind, you will not think the worſe of it becauſe I pretend not, myſelf, to have worked in the quarry. In a word, and to drop this magnificent alluſion, if I account to you for the riſe and genius of chivalry, it is all you are to expect: For an idea of what chivalry was in itſelf, you may have recourſe to the xx tom. of the *Memoirs of the Academy of Inſcriptions and belles Lettres.*

And with this explanation I return to my proper buſineſs.

Supposing my idea of chivalry to be fully given, the conjecture I advance on the *origin and nature* of it, you incline to think, may deſerve to be admitted. But you

you may, perhaps, admit it the more readily, if you reflect, "That there is "a remarkable correſpondency between "the manners of the old heroic times, "as painted by their great romancer, "Homer, and thoſe which are repre- "ſented to us in the books of modern "knight-errantry." A fact, of which no good account, I believe, can be given but by the aſſiſtance of another, not leſs certain, "That the political ſtate "of Greece, in the earlier periods of it's "ſtory, was ſimilar in many reſpects to "that of Europe, as broken by the feu- "dal ſyſtem into an infinite number of "petty independent governments."

It is not my deſign to encroach on the province of the learned perſon [*a*], to whom I owe this hint, and who hath undertaken, at his leiſure, to enlarge upon it.

[*a*] See the Memoir, juſt quoted.

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it. But ſome few circumſtances of agreement between the *heroic* and *gothic* manners, ſuch as are moſt obvious and occur to my memory, while I am writing, may be worth putting down, by way of ſpecimen only of what may be expected from a profeſſed inquiry into this curious ſubject.

And, FIRST, "the military enthuſiaſm of the Barons is but of a piece "with the fanaticiſm of the Heroes." Hence the ſame particularity of deſcription in the account of battles, wounds, deaths in the Greek poet, as in the gothic romancers. Hence that perpetual ſucceſſion of combats and deeds of arms, even to ſatiety, in the Iliad: And hence that minute curioſity in the diſplay of their dreſſes, arms, accoutrements, which appears ſo ſtrange, in that poem. The minds of all men, being occupied and in a manner poſſeſſed with warlike images;

ges and ideas, were much gratified by the poet's dwelling on the very slightest circumstances of these things; which now, for want of their prejudices, appear cold and unaffecting to modern readers.

But the correspondency holds in more particular considerations. For

2. "We hear much of Knights-errant "encountering *Giants*, and quelling *Sa-* "*vages*, in books of chivalry,"

These Giants were oppressive feudal Lords, and every Lord was to be met with, like the Giant, in his strong hold, or castle. Their dependants of a lower form, who imitated the violence of their superiors, and had not their castles, but their lurking-places, were the Savages of Romance. The greater Lord was called a Giant, for his power; the less, a Savage, for his brutality.

All this is shadowed out in the gothic tales,

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tales, and ſometimes expreſſed in plain words. The objects of the knight's vengeance go indeed by the various names of Giants, Paynims, Saracens and Savages. But of what family they all are, is clearly ſeen from the Poet's deſcription.

What Miſter wight, quoth he, and how far hence
Is he, that doth to travellers ſuch harms?
He is, ſaid he, a man of great defence,
Expert in battle, and in deeds of arms;
And more emboldened by the wicked charms
With which his daughter doth him ſtill ſupport;
Having *great Lordſhips got and goodly farms*
Thro' ſtrong oppreſſion of his pow'r extort;
By which he ſtill them holds and keeps with ſtrong effort.

And daily he his wrong encreaſeth more:
For never wight he lets to paſs that way
Over his bridge, albee he rich or poor,
But he him makes his paſſage-penny pay:
Elſe he doth hold him back or beat away.

Thereto

Thereto he hath a *Groom of evil Guiſe*
Whoſe ſcalp is bare that bondage doth bewray,
Which polls and pills the poor in piteous wiſe,
But he himſelf upon the rich doth tyrannize.

SPENSER, B. v. C. 2.

Here we have the great oppreſſive Baron very graphically ſet forth: And the *Groom of evil guiſe* is as plainly the Baron's vaſſal. The romancers, we ſee, took no great liberty with theſe reſpectable perſonages, when they called the one a Giant, and the other a Savage.

"Another terror of the gothic ages "was, *Monſters*, *Dragons*, and *Serpents*." Theſe ſtories were received in thoſe days for ſeveral reaſons: 1. From the vulgar belief of enchantments: 2. From their being reported on the faith of Eaſtern tradition, by the adventurers into the holy land: 3. In ſtill later times, from the

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the ſtrange things told and believed, on the diſcovery of the new world.

This laſt conſideration we find employed by Spenſer to give an air of probability to his Faery tales, in the preface to his ſecond book.

Now in all theſe reſpects Greek antiquity very much reſembles the Gothic. For what are Homer's Læſtrigons, and Cyclops, but bands of lawleſs ſavages, with, each of them, a Giant of enormous ſize at their head? And what are the Grecian Bacchus, Hercules, and Theſeus but Knights-errant, the exact counter-parts of Sir Launcelot and Amadis de Gaule?

For this interpretation we have the authority of our great Poet.

Such

Such [illegible] was BACCHUS; that with furious might
All the East, before untam'd, did overcome,
And wrong repressed and establish'd right,
Which lawless men had formerly fordonne.

Next HERCULES his like ensample shewed,
Who all the West with equal conquest wonne,
And monstrous tyrants with his club subdu'd,
The club of justice drad, with kingly pow'r endu'd.

B. v. C. 1.

Nay, could the very castle of a Gothic giant be better described than in the words of Homer,

High walls and battlements the courts inclose,
And the strong gates defy a host of foes.

Od. B. XVII. ver. 318.

And do not you remember that the Grecian worthies were, in their day, as famous for encountering Dragons and quelling Monsters of all sorts, as for suppressing Giants?

---- per

—— per ilos cecidere juſti
Morte Centauri, cecidit tremendæ
Flamma Chimæræ.

3. "The oppreſſions, which it was the glory of the Knight to avenge, were frequently carried on, as we are told, *by the charms and enchantments of women*."

These *charms*, we may ſuppoſe, are often metaphorical, as expreſſing only the blandiſhments of the ſex, by which they either ſeconded the deſigns of their Lords, or were enabled to carry on deſigns for themſelves. Sometimes they are taken to be real; the ignorance of thoſe ages acquieſcing in ſuch conceits.

And are not theſe ſtories matched by thoſe of Calypſo and Circe, the enchantreſſes of the Greek poet?

But there are conformities more directly to our purpoſe.

4. "Robbery and Pyracy were ho-

nourable in both; so far were they from reflecting any discredit on the antient or modern *redressers of wrongs.*"

What account can be given of this, but that, in the feudal times and in the early days of Greece, when government was weak and unable to redress the frequent injuries of petty sovereigns, it would be glorious for private adventurers to undertake this work; and, if they could accomplish it in no other way, to pay them in kind by downright plunder and rapine?

This in effect is the account given us of the same disposition of the old Germans, by Cæsar. "Latrocinia, says he, nullam habent infamiam, quæ extra fines cujusque civitatis fiunt." And the reason appears from what he had just told us—"in pace, nullus est communis magistratus; sed principes regionum atque pagorum inter suos jus dicunt, controversi-

que

quo minuant." *De bello Gall.* l. vi. § 21.

5. Their manners, in another respect, were the same. "Bastardy was in credit with both." They were extremely watchful over the chastity of their own women; but such as they could seize upon in the enemy's quarter, were lawful prize. Or, if at any time they transgressed in this sort at home, the heroic ages were complaisant enough to cover the fault by an ingenious fiction. The offspring was reputed divine.

Nay, so far did they carry their indulgence to this commerce, that their greatest heroes were the fruit of Goddesses approached by mortals: just as we hear of the doughtiest knights being born of Fairies.

Is it not strange, that, together with the greatest fierceness and savageness of character, "The utmost generosity, hos-

pitality, and courtesy should be imputed to the heroic ages?" Achilles was at once the most relentless, vindictive, implacable, and the friendliest of men.

We have the very same representation in the Gothic Romances, where it is almost true what Butler says humorously of these benign heroes, that

They did in fight but cut work out,
T' employ their courtesies about.

How are these contradictions to be reconciled but by observing, that, as in those lawless times dangers and distresses of all sorts abounded, there would be the more demand for compassion, gentleness, and generous attachments to the unfortunate, those especially of their own clan, as of resentment, rage, and animosity against their enemies?

7. Again: Consider the Olympic Games, which ancient Greece delighted to cele-

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brate on great and solemn occasions. And see if they had not the same origin, and the same purpose, as the *Tournaments* of the Gothic warriors.

8. Lastly, "the passion for adventures, so natural in their situation, would be as naturally attended with the love of praise and glory."

Hence the same encouragement, in the old Greek and Gothic times, to panegyrists and poets; the BARDS being as welcome to the tables of the feudal lords, as the AOIAOI of old, to those of the Grecian heroes.

And, as the same causes ever produce the same effects, we find that, even so late as Elizabeth's reign, the savage Irish (who were much in the state of the antient Greeks, living under the anarchy, rather than government, of their numberless puny chiefs) had their Rhymers in

principal eſtimation. It was for the reaſon juſt given, for the honour of their panegyrics on their fierce adventures and ſucceſſes. And thus it was in Greece.

For chief to Poets ſuch reſpect belongs
By rival nations courted for their Songs;
Theſe, ſtates invite, and mighty kings admire
Wide as the Sun diſplays his vital fire.
Od. B. xvii.

LETTER V.

THE purpoſe of the caſual hints, ſuggeſted in my laſt letter, was only to ſhew that the reſemblance between the heroic and Gothic ages is very great. And tho' you ſay true, that ignorance and barbarity itſelf might account for ſome circumſtances of this reſemblance, yet the parallel would hardly have held ſo long, and run ſo closely, if the *civil* condition of both had not been much the ſame.

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So that when we ſee a ſort of chivalry ſpringing up among the Greeks, who were confeſſedly in a ſtate reſembling that of the feudal barons, and attended by the like ſymptoms and effects, is it not fair to conclude that the chivalry of the Gothic times was owing to that common correſponding *ſtate*, and received it's character from it?

And this circumſtance, by the way, accounts for the conſtant mixture, which the modern critic eſteems ſo monſtrous, of pagan fable with the fairy tales of Romance. The paſſion for antient learning, juſt then revived, might ſeduce the claſſic poets, ſuch as Spenſer and Taſſo, for inſtance, into this practice; but the ſimilar turn and genius of antient manners and of the fictions founded upon them, would make it appear eaſy and natural in all.

I am aware, as you object to me, that, in the affair of *Religion* and *Gallantry*, the reſemblance between the hero and knight is not ſo ſtriking.

But the religious character of the knight was an accident of the times, and no proper effect of his *civil* condition.

And that his devotion for the ſex ſhould ſo far ſurpaſs that of the hero, is a freſh confirmation of my ſyſtem.

For, tho' much, no doubt, might be owing to the different humour and genius of the Eaſt and Weſt, antecedent to any cuſtom and forms of government, and independent of them, yet the conſideration had of the females in the feudal conſtitution will, of itſelf, account for this difference. It made them capable of ſucceeding to fiefs as well as the men

men. And does not one ſee, on the inſtant, what reſpect and dependence this privilege would draw upon them?

It was of mighty conſequence who ſhould obtain the grace of a rich heireſs. And tho', in the ſtrict feudal times, ſhe was ſuppoſed to be in the power and diſpoſal of her ſuperior Lord, yet this rigid ſtate of things did not laſt long; and, while it did laſt, could not abate much of the homage that would be paid to the fair feudatary.

Thus, when intereſt had begun the habit, the language of love and flattery would ſoon do the reſt. And to what that language tended you may ſee by the conſtant ſtrain of the Romances themſelves

Some diſtreſſed damſel was the ſpring and mover of every knight's adventure. She was to be reſcued by his arms, or won by the fame and admiration of his proweſs.

The

The plain meaning of all which was this: That, as in thoſe turbulent feudal times a protector was neceſſary to the weakneſs of the ſex, ſo the courteous and valorous knight was to approve himſelf fully qualified for that office. And we find, he had other motives to ſet him on work than the mere charms and graces, tho' ever ſo bewiching, of the perſon addreſſed.

Hence then, as I ſuppoſe, the cuſtom was introduced: And, when introduced, you will hardly wonder it ſhould operate much longer and farther than the reaſon may ſeem to require, on which it was founded.

In concluſion of this topic I muſt juſt obſerve to you, that the two poems of Homer expreſs in the livelieſt manner, and were intended to expoſe, the capital miſchiefs

miſchiefs and inconveniences ariſing from the *political ſtate* of old Greece: The Iliad, the diſſenſions that naturally ſpring up amongſt a number of independent chiefs; And the Odyſſey, the inſolence of their greater ſubjects, more eſpecially when unreſtrained by the preſence of their Sovereign.

These were the ſubjects of his pen. And can any thing more exactly reſemble the condition of the *feudal times*, when, on occaſion of any great enterprize, as that of the Cruſades, the deſigns of the confederate Chriſtian ſtates were perpetually fruſtrated, or interrupted at leaſt, by the diſſenſions of their leaders; and their affairs at home as perpetually diſtreſſed and diſordered by the rebellious uſurpations of their greater vaſſals?

So that Jeruſalem was to the Euro-

pean,

pean, what Troy had been to the Grecian Princes. And you will now, I believe, not be surprized to find that Tasso's immortal poem was planned after the model of the Iliad.

LETTER VI.

LET it be no surprize to you that, in the close of my last Letter, I presumed to bring the *Gierusalemme liberata* into competition with the Iliad.

So far as the heroic and Gothic manners are the same, the pictures of each, if well taken, must be equally entertaining. But I go further, and maintain that the circumstances, in which they differ, are clearly to the advantage of the Gothic designers.

You see, my purpose is to lead you from this forgotten chivalry to a more amusing

amazing subject, I mean the *Fairy* we ſtill read, and which was founded upon it.

Much has been ſaid, and with great truth, of the felicity of Homer's age, for poetical manners. But as Homer was a citizen of the world, when he had ſeen in Greece, on the one hand, the manners he has deſcribed, could he, on the other hand, have ſeen in the weſt the manners of the feudal ages, I make no doubt but he would certainly have preferred the latter. And the grounds of this preference would, I ſuppoſe, have been "*The improved gallantry of the feudal times*, and the *ſuperior ſolemnity of* "*their ſuperſtitions.*"

If any great poet, like Homer, had lived amongſt, and ſung of, the Gothic knights (for after all Spenſer and Taſſo came too late, and it was impoſſible for them

them to paint truly and perfectly what was no longer seen or believed) this preference, I persuade myself, had been very sensible. But their fortune was not so happy.

---- omnes illacrymabiles.
Urgentur, ignotique longâ
Nocte, carent quia vate sacro.

As it is we may take a guess of what the subject was capable of affording a real genius from the rude sketches we have of it, in the old Romances. And it is but looking into any of them to be convinced that the *gallantry*, which inspirited the feudal times, was of a nature to furnish the poet with finer scenes and subjects of description in every view, than the simple and uncontrolled barbarity of the Grecian.

The principal entertainment arising from the delineation of these consists in the

the exercise of the boisterous passions; which are provoked and kept alive from one end of the Iliad to the other, by every imaginable scene of rage, revenge, and slaughter. In the other, together with these, the gentler and more humane affections are awakened in us by the most interesting displays of love and friendship; of love, elevated to its noblest heights; and of friendship, operating on the purest motives. The mere variety of these paintings is a relief to the reader, as well as writer. But their beauty, novelty, and pathos give them a vast advantage on the comparison.

Consider, withall, the surprizes, accidents, adventures, which probably and naturally attend on the life of wandering knights; the occasion there must be for describing the wonders of different countries, and of presenting to view the manners

ners and policies of diſtant ſtates: all which make ſo conſpicuous a part of the materials of the greater poetry.

So that, on the whole, tho' the ſpirit, paſſions, rapine, and violence of the two ſets of manners were equal, yet there was a dignity, a magnificence, a variety in the feudal, which the other wanted.

As to *religious machinery*, perhaps the popular ſyſtem of each was equally remote from reaſon, yet the latter had ſomething in it more amuſing, as well as more awakening to the imagination.

The current popular tales of Elves and Fairies were even fitter to take the credulous mind, and charm it into a willing admiration of the *ſpecious miracles*, which wayward fancy delights in, than thoſe of the old traditionary fabble of pagan divinities. And then, for the more

ſolemn

solemn fancies of witchcraft and incantation, the horrors of the Gothic were above measure striking and terrible. The mummeries of the pagan priests were ridiculous, but the Gothic Enchanters shook and alarmed all nature.

We feel this difference very sensibly in reading the antient and modern poets. You would not compare the Canidia of Horace with the Witches in Macbeth. And what are Virgil's myrtles dropping blood, to Tasso's enchanted forest?

Ovid indeed, who had a fancy turn'd to romance, makes Medea, in a rant, talk wildly. But was this the common language of their other writers? The enchantress in Virgil says cooly of the very chiefest prodigies of her charms and poisons,

His ego sæpe lupum fieri, & se condere sylvis
Moerin; sæpe animas imis excire sepulchris,
Atque satas alio vidi traducere messes.

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The admirable poet has given an air of the marvellous to his ſubject, by the magic of his expreſſion. Elſe, what do we find here, but the ordinary effects of *melancholy*, the vulgar ſuperſtition of *evoking Spirits*, and the ſuppoſed influence of *faſcination* on the hopes of rural induſtry.

Non iſthic obliquo oculo mihi commoda quiſquam
Limat----

ſays the poet of his country-ſeat, as if this ſecurity from a *faſcinating Eye* were a ſingular privilege, and the mark of a more than common good fortune.

Shakeſpear, on the other hand, with a terrible ſublime (which not ſo much the energy of his genius, as the nature of his ſubject drew from him) gives us another idea of the *rough magic*, as he calls it, of fairy enchantment.

— I have

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---I have bedimm'd
The noon-tide Sun, call'd forth the mutinous winds,
And 'twixt the green ſea and the azure vault
Set roaring war; to the dread rattling thunder
Have I giv'n fire, and rifted Jove's ſtout oak
With his own bolt: The ſtrong-bas'd promontory
Have I made ſhake, and by the ſpurrs pluck'd up
The Pine and Cedar: Graves, at my command,
Have open'd, and let forth their ſleepers.---

The laſt circumſtance, you will ſay, is but the *animas imis excire ſepulchris* of the latin poet. But a very ſignificant word marks the difference. The pagan necromancers had a hundred little tricks by which they pretended to call up the ghoſts, or ſhadows of the dead: but theſe, in the ideas of paganiſm, were quite another thing from Shakeſpear's *Sleepers*.

This may ſerve for a caſt of Shakeſ-

pear's magic. And I can't but think that, when Milton wanted to paint the horrors of that night (one of the nobleſt parts in his *Paradiſe Regained*) which the Devil himſelf is feigned to conjure up in the wilderneſs, the Gothic language and ideas helped him to work up his tempeſt with ſuch terror. You will judge from theſe lines:

--- nor ſtaid the terror there;
Infernal ghoſts and helliſh furies round
Environ'd; ſome howl'd, ſome yell'd, ſome ſhriek'd,
Some bent at thee their fiery darts---

But above all from the following,

Thus paſs'd the night ſo foul, till morning fair
Came forth with pilgrim ſteps in amice gray,
Who with her *radiant finger* ſtill'd the roar
Of thunder, chas'd the clouds, and laid the winds
And *grieſly ſpectres* ----

Where the *radiant finger* points at the potent

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potent wand of the Gothic magicians, which could reduce the calm of nature, upon occaſion, as well as diſturb it; and the *grieſly ſpecters laid* by the approach of morn, were apparently of their raiſing, as a ſagacious critic perceived when he took notice "how very "injudicious it was to retail the *popular* "*ſuperſtition* in this place [*e*]."

After all, the concluſion is not to be drawn ſo much from particular paſſages, as from the *general impreſſion* left on our minds in reading the antient and modern poets. And this is ſo much in favour of the *Latter*, that Mr. Addiſon ſcruples not to ſay, "The Antients have not "much of this poetry among them; for, "indeed (continues he) almoſt the whole "ſubſtance of it owes it's original to the "darkneſs and ſuperſtition of later "ages. Our forefathers looked upon na-

[*e*] In Dr. Newton's edition.

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" ture with more reverence and horror,
" before the world was enlightened by
" learning and philoſophy, and loved to
" aſtoniſh themſelves with the apprehen-
" ſions of Witchcraft, Prodigies, Charms,
" and Inchantments. There was not a
" village in England, that had not a
" Ghoſt in it, the churchyards were all
" haunted, every large common had a
" circle of fairies belonging to it, and
" there was ſcarce a Shepherd to be met
" with who had not ſeen a ſpirit."

We are upon enchanted ground, my friend; and you are to think yourſelf well uſed that I detain you no longer in this fearful circle. The glympſe, you have had of it, will help your imagination to conceive the reſt. And without more words you will readily apprehend that the fancies of our modern bards are not only more gallant, but, on a change of the ſcene, more ſublime, more terrible

terrible, more alarming, than those of the classic fablers. In a word, you will find that the *manners* they paint, and the *superstitions* they adopt, are the more poetical for being Gothic.

LETTER VII.

BUT nothing shews the difference of the two systems under consideration more plainly, than the effect they really had on the two greatest of our Poets; at least the Two which an English reader is most fond to compare with Homer. I mean SPENSER and MILTON.

It is not to be doubted but that each of those bards had kindled his poetic fire from classic fables. So that, of course, their prejudices would lie that way. Yet they both appear, when most inflamed, to have been more particularly rapt with the Gothic fables of chivalry.

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Spenser, tho' he had been long nourished with the ſpirit and ſubſtance of Homer and Virgil, choſe the times of chivalry for his theme, and fairy Land for the ſcene of his fictions. He could have planned, no doubt, an heroic deſign on the exact claſſic model: Or, he might have trimmed between the Gothic and Claſſic, as his contemporary Taſſo did. But the charms of *fairy* prevailed. And if any think, he was ſeduced by Arioſto into this choice, they ſhould conſider that it could be only for the ſake of his ſubject; for the genius and character of theſe poets was widely different.

Under this idea then of a Gothic, not claſſical poem, the *Faery Queen* is to be read and criticized. And on theſe principles, it would not be difficult to unfold it's merit in another way than has been hitherto attempted.

Milton

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Milton, it is true, preferred the claſſic model to the Gothic. But it was after long hæſitation; and his favourite ſubject was *Arthur and his Knights of the round table*. On this he had fixed for the greater part of his life. What led him to change his mind was, partly, as I ſuppoſe, his growing fanaticiſm; partly, his ambition to take a different route from Spenſer; but chiefly perhaps, the diſcredit into which the ſtories of chivalry had now fallen by the immortal ſatire of Cervantes. Yet we ſee thro' all his poetry, where his enthuſiaſm flames out moſt, a certain predilection for the legends of chivalry before the fables of Greece.

This circumſtance, you know, has given offence to the auſterer and more mechanical critics. They are ready to cenſure his judgment, as juvenile and unformed, when they ſee him ſo delighted,

ed, on all occasions, with the Gothic romances. But do these censors imagine that Milton did not perceive the defects of these works, as well as they? No: it was not the *composition* of books of chivalry, but the *manners* described in them, that took his fancy; as appears from his *Allegro*---

Towred cities please us then
And the busy hum of men,
Where throngs of knights and barons bold
In weeds of peace high triumphs hold,
With store of ladies, whose bright eyes
Rain influence, and judge the prize
Of wit, or arms, while both contend
To win her grace, whom all commend.

And when in the *Penseroso* he draws, by a fine contrivance, the same kind of image to sooth melancholy which he had before given to excite mirth, he indeed extolls an *author* of one of these romances,

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manner, as he had before, in general, extolled the *subject* of them; but it is an author worthy of his praise; not the writer of *Amadis*, or *Sir Lancelot of the Lake*, but Chaucer himself, who has left an unfinished story on the Gothic or feudal model.

Or, call up him that left half-told
The story of Cambuscan bold,
Of Camball and of Algarsife,
And who had Canace to wife
That own'd the virtuous ring and glass,
And of the wondrous horse of brass,
On which the Tartar king did ride;
And if ought else great bards beside
In sage and solemn tunes have sung
Of turneys and of trophies hung,
Of forests and inchantments drear,
Where more is meant than meets the ear.

The conduct then of these two poets may incline us to think with more respect, than is commonly done of the *Gothic manners*, I mean as adapted to the uses of the greater poetry.

I say,

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I say, nothing of Shakespear, because the sublimity (the divinity, let it be, if nothing else will serve) of his genius kept no certain rout, but rambled at hazard into all the regions of human life and manners. So that we can hardly say what he preferred, or what he rejected, on full deliberation. Yet one thing is clear, that even he is greater when he uses Gothic manners and machinery, than when he employs classical: which brings us again to the same point, that the former have, by their nature and genius, the advantage of the latter in producing the *sublime*.

LETTER VIII.

I spoke "of criticizing Spenser's poem, "under the idea, not of a classical "but Gothic composition."

It is certain much light might be thrown on that singular work, were an able critic to consider it in this view. For instance, he might go some way towards explaining,

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explaining, perhaps juſtifying, the general plan and *conduct* of the Faery Queen; which, to claſſical readers has appeared indefenſible.

I have taken the fancy, with your leave, to try my hand on this curious ſubject.

When an architect examines a Gothic ſtructure by Grecian rules, he finds nothing but deformity. But the Gothic architecture has it's own rules, by which when it comes to be examined, it is ſeen to have it's merit, as well as the Grecian. The queſtion is not, which of the two is conducted in the ſimpleſt or trueſt taſte: but, whether there be not ſenſe and deſign in both, when ſcrutinized by the laws on which each is projected.

The ſame obſervation holds of the two ſorts of poetry. Judge of the *Faery Queen* by the claſſic models, and you are

ſhocked

shocked with it's disorder: consider it with an eye to it's Gothic original, and you find it regular. The unity and simplicity of the former are more complete: but the latter has that sort of unity and simplicity, which results from it's nature.

The Faery Queen then, as a Gothic poem, derives it's METHOD, as well as the other characters of it's composition, from the established modes and ideas of chivalry.

It was usual, in the days of knight-errantry, at the holding of any great feast, for Knights to appear before the Prince, who presided at it, and claim the privilege of being sent on any adventure, to which the solemnity might give occasion. For it was supposed that, when such a *throng of knights and barons bold*, as Milton speaks of, were got together, the distressed would flock in from all quarters, as to a place where they knew they might find and claim redress for all their grievances.

This

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This was the real practice, in the days of pure and antient chivalry. And an image of this practice was afterwards kept up in the caſtles of the great, on any extraordinary feſtival or ſolemnity: of which, if you want an inſtance, I refer you to the deſcription of a feaſt made at Liſle in 1453, in the court of Philip the Good, Duke of Burgundy, for a cruſade againſt the Turks: As you may find it given at large in the memoirs of *Matthieu de Conci*, *Olivier de la Marche*, and *Monſtrelet*.

That feaſt was held for *twelve* days: and each day was diſtinguiſhed by the claim and allowance of ſome adventure.

Now laying down this practice, as a foundation for the poet's deſign, you will ſee how properly the *Faery Queen* is conducted.

——"I deviſe, ſays the poet himſelf "in his Letter to Sir W. Raleigh, that

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" the Faery Queen kept her annual " feaſte xii days: upon which xii ſeve- " ral days, the occaſions of the xii ſeve- " ral adventures hapened; which being " undertaken by xii ſeveral knights, are " in theſe xii books ſeverally handled."

Here you have the poet delivering his own method, and the reaſon of it. It aroſe out of the order of his ſubject. And would you deſire a better reaſon for his choice?

Yes; you will ſay, a poet's method is not that of his ſubject. I grant you, as to the order of *time*, in which the recital is made; for here, as Spenſer obſerves (and his own practice agrees to the Rule) lies the main difference between *the poet hiſtorical, and the hiſtoriographer*: The reaſon of which is drawn from the nature of Epic compoſition itſelf, and holds equally, let the ſubject be what it will, and whatever the ſyſtem of manners be, on which

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it is conducted. Gothic or Claſſic makes no difference in this reſpect.

But the caſe is not the ſame with regard to the general plan of a work, or what may be called the order of *diſtribution*, which is and muſt be governed by the ſubject-matter itſelf. It was as requiſite for the Faery Queen to conſiſt of the adventures of twelve knights, as for the Odyſſey to be confined to the adventures of one Hero: Juſtice had otherwiſe not been done to his ſubject.

So that if you will ſay any thing againſt the poet's method, you muſt ſay that he ſhould not have choſen this ſubject. But this objection ariſes from your claſſic ideas of Unity, which have no place here; and are in every view foreign to the purpoſe, if the poet has found means to give his work, tho' conſiſting of many parts, the advantage of Unity. For in ſome reaſon-

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noble ſenſe or other, it is agreed, every work of art muſt be *one*, the very idea of a work requiring it.

If you aſk then, what is this *Unity* of Spenſer's Poem? I ſay, It conſiſts in the relation of it's ſeveral adventures to one common *original*, the appointment of the Faery Queen; and to one common *end*, the completion of the Faery Queen's injunctions. The knights iſſued forth on their adventures on the breaking up of this annual feaſt; and the next annual feaſt, we are to ſuppoſe, is to bring them together again from the atchievement of their ſeveral charges.

This, it is true, is not the claſſic Unity, which conſiſts in the repreſentation of one entire action: but it is an Unity of another ſort, an unity reſulting from the reſpect which a number of related actions have to one common purpoſe. In other

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words, it is an unity of *design*, and not of action.

This Gothic method of design in poetry, may be, in some sort, illustrated by what is called the Gothic method of design in Gardening. A wood or grove cut out into many separate avenues or glades was amongst the most favourite of the works of art, which our fathers attempted in this species of cultivation. These walks were distinct from each other, had, each, their several destination, and terminated on their own proper objects. Yet the whole was brought together and considered under one view by the relation which these various openings had, not to each other, but to their common and concurrent center. You and I are, perhaps, agreed that this sort of gardening is not of so true a taste as that which *Kent and Nature* have brought us ac-

quainted with; where the ſupreme art of the Deſigner conſiſts in diſpoſing his ground and objects into an *entire landſkip*; and grouping them, if I may uſe the term, in ſo eaſy a manner, that the careleſs obſerver, tho' he be taken with the ſymmetry of the whole, diſcovers no art in the combination:

In lieto aſpetto il bel giardin s'aperſe,
Acque ſtagnanti, mobili criſtalli,
Fior vari, e varie piante, herbe diverſe,
Apriche Collinette, ombroſe valli,
Selve, e ſpelunche in UNA VISTA offerſe:
E quel, che'l bello, e'l caro accreſce à l'opre,
L'Arte, che tutto fà, nulla ſi ſcopre.
TASSO. C. XVI. S. ix.

This, I ſay, may be the trueſt taſte in gardening, becauſe the ſimpleſt: Yet there is a manifeſt regard to unity in the other method; which has had it's admirers, as it may have again, and is certainly not without it's *deſign* and beauty.

But to return to our poet. Thus far he

he drew from Gothic ideas, and these ideas, I think, would lead him no farther. But, as Spenser knew what belonged to classic composition, he was tempted to tie his subject still closer together by *one* expedient of his own, and by *another* taken from his classic models.

His *own* was to interrupt the proper story of each book, by dispersing it into several; involving by this means, and as it were intertwisting the several actions together, in order to give something like the appearance of one action to his twelve adventures. And for this conduct, as absurd as it seems, he had some great examples in the Italian poets, tho' I believe, they were led into it by different motives.

The *other* expedient which he borrowed from the classics, was by adopting one superior character, which should be seen

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throughout. Prince Arthur, who had a ſeparate adventure of his own, was to have his part in each of the other; and thus ſeveral actions were to be embodied by the intereſt which one principal Hero had in them all. It is even obſervable, that Spenſer gives this adventure of Prince Arthur, in queſt of Gloriana, as the proper ſubject of his poem. And upon this idea the late learned editor of the Faery Queen has attempted, but I think without ſucceſs, to defend the Unity and ſimplicity of it's fable. The truth was, the violence of claſſic prejudices forced the poet to affect this appearance of unity, tho' in contradiction to his gothic ſyſtem. And, as far as we can judge of the tenour of the whole work from the finiſhed half of it, the adventure of Prince Arthur, whatever the author pretended, and his critic too eaſily believed, was but an after thought; and at leaſt with regard to the *hiſtorical fable*, which we are now conſidering,

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conſidering, was only one of the expedients by which he would conceal the diſorder of his Gothic plan.

And if this was his deſign, I will venture to ſay that both his expedients were injudicious. Their purpoſe was to ally two things, in nature incompatible, the Gothic, and the claſſic unity; the effect of which miſalliance was to diſcover and expoſe the nakedneſs of the Gothic.

I am of opinion then, conſidering the Faery Queen as an epic or *narrative* poem conſtructed on Gothic ideas, that the Poet had done well to affect no other unity than that of *deſign*, by which his ſubject was connected. But his poem is not ſimply narrative; it is throughout *Allegorical*; he calls it *a perpetual allegory or dark conceit*; and this character, for reaſons I may have occaſion to obſerve hereafter, was even predominant in the

Faery Queen. His narration is subservient to his moral, and but serves to colour it. This he tells us himself at setting out.

Fierce wars and faithful loves shall moralize my song,

that is, shall serve for a vehicle, or instrument to convey the moral.

Now under this idea, the *Unity* of the Faery Queen is more apparent. His twelve knights are to exemplify as many virtues, out of which one illustrious character is to be composed. And in this view the part of Prince Arthur in each book becomes *essential*, and yet not *principal*; exactly, as the poet has contrived it. They who rest in the literal story, that is, who criticize it on the footing of a narrative poem, have constantly objected to this management. They say, it necessarily breaks the unity of design.

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Prince Arthur, they affirm, ſhould either have had no part in the other adventures, or he ſhould have had the chief part. He ſhould either have done nothing, or more. And the objection is unanſwerable; at leaſt I know of nothing that can be ſaid to remove it but what I have ſuppoſed above might be the purpoſe of the poet, and which I myſelf have rejected as inſufficient.

But how faulty ſoever this conduct be in the literal ſtory, it is perfectly right in the *moral*: and that for an obvious reaſon, that his critics ſeem not to have been aware of it. His chief hero was not to have the twelve virtues in the *degree* in which the knights had, each of them, their own; (ſuch a character would be a monſter) but he was to have ſo much of each as was requiſite to form his ſuperior character. Each virtue, in its perfection, is exemplified in its own knight:

knight-errantry are all, in a due degree, concentred in Prince Arthur.

This was the poet's *moral*. And what way of expreſſing this moral in the *hiſtory*, but by making Prince Arthur appear in each adventure, and in a manner ſubordinate to it's proper hero? Thus, tho' inferior to each in his own ſpecific virtue, he is ſuperior to all by uniting the whole circle of their virtues in himſelf: And thus he arrives, at length, at the poſſeſſion of that bright form of *Glory*, whoſe ravishing beauty, as ſeen in a dream or viſion, had led him out into theſe miraculous adventures in the land of Faery.

The concluſion is, that, as an *allegorical* poem, the method of the Faery Queen is governed by the juſtneſs of the *moral*: As a *narrative* poem, it is conducted on the ideas and uſages of *chivalry*.

valry. In either view, if taken by itself, the plan is defensible. But from the union of the two designs there arises a perplexity and confusion, which is the proper, and only considerable, defect of this extraordinary poem.

LETTER IX.

NO doubt Spenser might have taken one single adventure, of the TWELVE, for the subject of his Poem; or he might have given the principal part in every adventure to P. Arthur. By this means his fable had been of the classic kind, and it's unity as strict as that of Homer and Virgil.

All this the poet knew very well, but his purpose was not to write a classic poem. He chose to adorn a gothic story, and, to be consistent throughout, he

chuse

chose that the *form* of his work should be of a piece with his subject.

Did the Poet do right in this? I cannot tell, but comparing his work with that of another great Poet, who followed the system you seem to recommend, I see no reason to be peremptory in condemning his judgment.

The example of this poet deserves to be considered. It will afford, at least, a fresh confirmation of the point, I principally insist upon, I mean, *The preeminence of the Gothic manners and fictions, as adapted to the ends of poetry, above the classic.*

I observed of the famous Torquato Tasso, that, coming into the world a little of the latest for the success of the pure Gothic manner, he thought fit to *trim* between that and the classic model.

It

It was lucky for his fame, perhaps, that he did ſo. For the gothic fables falling every day more and more into contempt, and the learning of the times, throughout all Europe, taking a claſſic turn, the reputation of his work has been chiefly founded on the ſtrong reſemblance it has to the antient epic poems. His fable is conducted in the ſpirit of the Iliad, and with a ſtrict regard to that unity of *action* which we admire in Homer and Virgil.

But this is not all, we find a ſtudied and cloſe imitation of thoſe poets, in many of the ſmaller parts, in the minuter incidents, and even in the deſcriptions, and ſimilies of his poem.

The claſſic reader was pleaſed with this deference to the public taſte: he ſaw with delight the favourite beauties of Homer and Virgil reflected in the Italian

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lian poet: and was almoſt ready to exculpate, for the ſake of theſe, his magic tales and fairy enchantments.

I ſaid, was *almoſt ready*; for the offence given by theſe to the more faſhionable ſort of critics was ſo great, that nothing, I believe, could make full amends, in their judgment, for ſuch extravagancies.

However, by this means the *Gierusalemme Liberata* made it's fortune amongſt the French wits, who have conſtantly tried it up above the *Orlando furioſo*, and principally for this reaſon, that Taſſo was more claſſical in his fable, and more ſparing in the wonders of gothic fiction, than his Predeceſſor.

The Italians have indeed a predilection for their elder bard, whether from their prejudice for antiquity, their admiration of his language, the richneſs

of

of his invention; the comic air of his ſtyle and manner; or from whatever other reaſon.

Be this as it will, the French criticiſm has carried it before the Italian, with the reſt of Europe. This dextrous people have found means to lead the taſte, as well as ſet the faſhions, of their neighbours: And Arioſto ranks but little higher than the rudeſt romancer in the opinion of thoſe who take their notions of theſe things from their writers.

But the ſame principle, which made them give Taſſo the preference to Arioſto, has led them by degrees to think very unfavorably of Taſſo himſelf. The mixture of the gothic manner in his works has not been forgiven. It has ſunk the credit of all the reſt; and ſome inſtances of falſe taſte in the expreſſion of his ſentiments, detected, by their nicer critics,

tics, have brought matters to that paſs, that, with their good will, Taſſo himſelf ſhould now follow the fate of Arioſto.

I will not ſay, that a little national envy did not perhaps mix itſelf with their other reaſons for undervaluing this great poet. They aſpired to a ſort of ſupremacy in Letters; and finding the Italian language and its beſt writers ſtanding in their way, they have ſpared no pains to lower the eſtimation of both.

Whatever their inducements were, they ſucceeded but too well in their attempt. Our obſequious and over modeſt critics were run down by their authority. Their taſte of Letters, with ſome worſe things, was brought amongſt us at the Reſtoration. Their language, their manners, nay their very prejudices were adopted by our Frenchified king and his Royaliſts. And the more faſhionable wits,

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wits, of courſe, ſet their fancies, as my Lord Moleſworth tells us the people of Copenhagen in his time did their clocks, by the court-ſtandard.

Sir W. Davenant open'd the way to this new ſort of criticiſm in a very elaborate preface to Gondibert; and his philoſophic friend, Mr. Hobbes, lent his beſt aſſiſtance towards eſtabliſhing the credit of it. Theſe two fine Letters contain, indeed, the ſubſtance of whatever has been ſince written on the ſubject. Succeeding wits and critics did no more than echo their language. It grew into a ſort of cant, with which Rymer, and the reſt of that School, filled their flimſy eſſays and rambling prefaces.

Our noble critic himſelf * condeſcended to take up this trite theme: And it

* Lord Shaftesbury, *Adv. to an Author.*

is not to be told with what alacrity and self-complacency he flourishes upon it. The *Gothic manner*, as he calls it, is the favourite object of his raillery; which is never more lively or pointed, than when it exposes that "bad taste which "makes us prefer an Arioſto to a Virgil, "and a Romance (without doubt he "meant, of Taſſo) to an Iliad." Truly, this critical ſin requires an expiation, which is eaſily made by ſubſcribing to his ſentence, "That the French indeed may boaſt of legitimate authors "of a juſt reliſh; but that the Italians "are good for nothing but to corrupt "the taſte of thoſe who have had no "familiarity with the noble antients."

This ingenious nobleman is, himſelf, one of the *gallant coxcombs* he ſometimes makes himſelf ſo merry with. He is very perfectly enamoured of his *noble antients*, and will fight with any man who con-

tends, not that his Lordſhip's miſtreſs is not fair, but that his own is fair alſo.

It is certain the French wits benefited by this foible. For pretending, in great modeſty, to have formed themſelves on the pure taſte of his noble ancients, they eaſily drew his Lordſhip over to their party. While the Italians more ſtubbornly pretending to a taſte of their own, and chuſing to *lye* for themſelves, inſtead of adopting the authorized *lyes* of Greece, were juſtly expoſed to his reſentment.

Such was the addreſs of the French writers, and ſuch their triumphs over the poor Italians.

It muſt be owned, indeed, they had every advantage on their ſide, in this conteſt with their maſters. The taſte and learning of Italy had been long on the decline, and the fine writers under

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Louis XIV were every day advancing the French language, such as it is, (simple, clear, exact, that is, fit for business and conversation; but for that reason, besides its total want of numbers, absolutely unsuited to the genius of the greater poetry) towards it's last perfection. The purity of the antient manner became well understood, and it was the pride of their best critics to expose every instance of false taste in the modern writers. The Italian, it is certain, could not stand so severe a scrutiny. But they had escaped better, if the most fashionable of the French poets had not, at the same time, been their best guide.

A lucky word in a verse, which sounds well and every body gets by heart, goes farther than a volume of just criticism. In short, the exact, but cold Boileau happened to say something of the *clinquant* of Tasso; and the magic of this word

word, like the report of Aſtolfo's horn in Arioſto, overturned at once the ſolid and well built reputation of the Italian poetry.

It is not perhaps ſo amazing that this potent word ſhould do it's buſineſs in France. It put us into a fright on this ſide the water. Mr. Addiſon, who gave the law in taſte here, took it up and ſent it about the kingdom in his polite and popular eſſays. It became a ſort of watch-word among the critics; and, on the ſudden, nothing was heard, on all ſides, but the *clinquant* of Taſſo.

After all, theſe two reſpectable writers might not intend the miſchief they were doing. The obſervation was juſt, but was extended much farther than they meant, by their witleſs followers and admirers. The effect was, as I ſaid, that the Italian poetry was rejected in the

gress, by virtue of this cenſure; tho' the authors of it had ſaid no more than this, "That their beſt poet had ſome falſe "thoughts, and dealt, as they ſuppoſed, "too much in incredible fiction."

I leave you to make your own reflexions on this ſhort hiſtory of the Italian poetry. It is not my deſign to make it's apology in all reſpects. However, with regard to the *firſt* of theſe charges, I preſume to ſay that, as juſt as it is in the ſenſe in which I perſuade myſelf it was intended, there are more inſtances of natural ſentiment and of that divine ſimplicity we admire in the antients, even in Guarini's *Paſtor Fido*, than in the beſt of the French poets.

And as to the *laſt*, I pretend to ſhew you, in my next Letter, that it is no fault at all in the Italian poets.

LET-

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LETTER X.

CHI non ſa che coſa fia Italia?—If this queſtion could ever be reaſonably aſked on any occaſion, it muſt ſurely be when the wit and poetry of that people were under conſideration. The enchanting ſweetneſs of their tongue, the richneſs of their invention, the fire and elevation of their genius, the ſplendor of their expreſſion on great ſubjects, and the native ſimplicity of their ſentiments, on affecting ones; All theſe are ſuch manifeſt advantages on the ſide of the Italian poets, as ſhould ſeem to command our higheſt admiration of their great and capital works.

Yet a different language has been held by our finer critics. And in particular you hear it commonly ſaid of the tales of

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Faery, which they first and principally adorned, "That they are unnatural and absurd; that they surpass all "bounds not of truth only, but of probability; and look more like the "dreams of children, than the manly "inventions of poets."

All this, and more, has been said; and if truely said, who would not lament

L' arte del poëtar troppo infelice?

For they are not the cold fancies of plebeian poets, but the golden dreams of Ariosto, the celestial visions of Tasso, that are thus derided.

The only criticism, indeed, that is worth regarding is, the philosophical. But there is a sort which looks like philosophy, and is not. May not that be the case here?

This

This criticism, whatever name it deserves, supposes that the poets, who are lyars by profession, expect to have their lyes believed. Surely they are not so unreasonable. They think it enough, if they can but bring you to *imagine* the possibility of them.

And how small a matter will serve for this? A legend, a tale, a tradition, a rumour, a superstition; in short, any thing is enough to be the basis of their air-form'd *visions*. Does any capable reader trouble himself about the truth, or even the credibility of their fancies? Alas, no; he is best pleased when he is made to conceive (he minds not by what magic) the existence of such things as his reason tells him did not, and were never likely to, exist.

But here, to prevent mistakes, an explanation will be necessary. We must distinguish

diſtinguiſh between the *popular belief*, and *that of the Reader*. The fictions of poetry do, in ſome degree at leaſt, require the *firſt*; (They would, otherwiſe, deſervedly paſs for *dreams* indeed): But when the poet has this advantage on his ſide, and his fancies have, or may be ſuppoſed to have, a countenance from the current ſuperſtitions of the age, in which he writes, he diſpenſes with the *laſt*, and gives his Reader leave to be as ſceptical and as incredulous, as he pleaſes.

An eminent French critic diverts himſelf with imagining "what a per-"ſon, who comes freſh from reading "Mr. Addiſon and Mr. Lock, would "be apt to think of Taſſo's Enchant-"ment *."

* Voltaire, *Eſſai ſur la Poeſie Epique*, Ch. vii.

The

The Engliſh reader will, perhaps, ſmile at ſeeing theſe two writers ſo coupled together: And, with the critic's leave, we will put Mr. Lock out of the queſtion. But if he be deſirous to know what a reader of Mr. Addiſon would pronounce in the caſe, I can undertake to give him ſatisfaction.

Speaking of what Mr. Dryden calls, *the Faery way of writing*, "Men of "cold fancies and philoſophical diſpo- "ſitions, ſays he, object to this kind "of poetry, that it has not probability "enough to affect the imagination. "But--- many are prepoſſeſt with ſuch "falſe opinions, as diſpoſe them to "*believe* theſe particular deluſions: "At leaſt, we have all *hear'd* ſo many "pleaſing relations in favour of them, "that we do not care for ſeeing thro' "the *falſhood*, and willingly give our- "ſelves

« ſelves up to ſo agreable an impoſ-
« ture." [*Spect.* V. vi.]

Apply, now, this ſage judgment of Mr. Addiſon to *Taſſo's Enchantments*, and you ſee that a *falſhood convict* is not to be pleaded againſt a *ſuppoſed belief*, or even the *ſlighteſt hear-ſay*.

So little account does this wicked poetry make of philoſophical or hiſtorical truth: All ſhe allows us to look for, is *poetical truth*; a very ſlender thing indeed, and which the poet's eye, when rolling in it's fineſt frenzy, can but juſt lay hold of. To ſpeak in the philoſophic language of Mr. Hobbes. It is ſomething much *beyond the actual bounds, and only within the conceived poſſibility, of nature*.

But the ſource of bad criticiſm, as univerſally of bad philoſophy, is the abuſe of

of terms. A poet, they say, muſt follow *Nature*; and by Nature we are to ſuppoſe can only be meant the known and experienced courſe of affairs in this world. Whereas the poet has a world of his own, where experience has leſs to do, than conſiſtent imagination.

He has, beſides, a ſupernatural world to range in. He has Gods, and Faeries, and Witches at his command; And,

— — — — O! who can tell
The hidden *pow'r* of herbes, and might of magic ſpell?

Spenſer. B. 1. C. 2.

Thus in the poet's world, all is marvellous and extraordinary; yet not *unnatural* in one ſenſe, as it agrees to the conceptions that are readily entertained of theſe magical and wonder-working Natures.

This trite maxim of *following Nature* is

is further mistaken in applying it indiscriminately to all sorts of poetry.

In those species which have men and manners professedly for their theme, a strict conformity with human nature is reasonably demanded.

Non Me Centauros, non Gorgonas, Harpyiasque
Invenies: hominem pagina nostra sapit:

is a proper motto to a book of Epigrams, but would make a poor figure at the head of an epic poem.

Still further, in those species that address themselves to the heart and would obtain their end, not thro' the Imagination, but thro' the *Passions*, there the liberty of transgressing nature, I mean the real powers and properties of human nature, is infinitely restrained; and *poetical* truth is, under these circumstances, almost as severe a thing, as *historical*.

The

The reason is, we must first *believe*, before we can be *affected*.

But the case is different with the more sublime and creative poetry. This species, addressing itself solely or principally to the Imagination; a young and credulous faculty, which loves to admire and to be deceived; has no need to observe those cautious rules of credibility so necessary to be followed by him, who would touch the affections and interest the heart.

This difference, you will say, is obvious enough. How came it then to be overlooked? From another mistake, in extending a particular precept of the drama into a general maxim.

The *incredulus odi* of Horace ran in the heads of these critics, tho' his own words

words confine the obſervation ſingly to the ſtage.

Segnius irritant animos demiſſa per aurem
Quam quæ ſunt oculis ſubjecta fidelibus, et quæ
Ipſe ſibi tradit Spectator——

That, which paſſes in *repreſentation* and challenges, as it were, the ſcrutiny of the eye, muſt be truth itſelf, or ſomething very nearly approaching to it. But what paſſes in *narration*, even on the ſtage, is admitted without much difficulty.

multaque tolles
Ex oculis, quæ mox narret facundia præſens.

In the epic narration, which may be called *abſens facundia*, the reaſon of the thing ſhews this indulgence to be ſtill greater. It appeals neither to the *eye* nor the *ear*, but ſimply to the *imagination*, and ſo allows the poet a liberty of multiplying and enlarging his impoſtures

tures at pleaſure, in proportion to the eaſineſs and comprehenſion of that faculty.

Theſe general reflexions hardly require an application to the preſent ſubject. The tales of faery are exploded, as fantaſtic and incredible. They would merit this contempt, if preſented on the ſtage; I mean, if they were given as the proper ſubject of dramatic imitation, and the intereſt of the poet's plot were to be wrought out of the adventures of theſe marvellous perſons. But the epic muſe runs no riſque in giving way to ſuch fanciful exhibitions.

You may call them, as one does, "extraordinary dreams, ſuch as excellent poets and painters, by being "over ſtudious, may have in the beginning of fevers [b]."

[b] Sir W. Davenant's Preface.

The epic poet would acknowledge the charge, and even value himself upon it. He would say, "I leave to the sage dramatist the merit of being always broad awake, and always in his senses: The *divine dream* [c], and delirious fancy, are among the noblest of my prerogatives."

But the injustice done the Italian poets does not stop here. The cry is, "Magic and enchantments are senseless things. Therefore the Italian poets "are not worth the reading." As if, because the superstitions of Homer and Virgil are no longer believed, their poems, which abound in them, are good for nothing.

Yes, you will say, their fine pictures of life and manners—

[c] Ομος Ονειρος, Homer.

And

And may not I say the same, in behalf of Ariosto and Tasso? For it is not true that all is *unnatural* and monstrous in their poems, because of this mixture of the wonderful. Admit, for example, Armida's marvellous conveyance to the happy Island, and all the rest of the love-story is as natural, that is, as suitable to our common notions of that passion, as any thing in Virgil or (if you will) Voltaire.

Thus you see the apology of the Italian poets is easily made on every supposition. But I stick to my point and maintain that the faery tales of Tasso do him more honour than what are called the more natural, that is, the classical parts of his poem. His imitations of the ancients have indeed their merit; for he was a genius in every thing. But they are faint and cold and

almoſt inſipid, when compared with his original fictions. We make a ſhift to run over the paſſages he has copied from Virgil. We are all on fire amidſt the magical feats of Iſmen, and the enchantments of Armida.

Magnanima menſogna! hor quando è il vero
Si bello, che ſi poſſa à te preporre?

I ſpeak at leaſt for myſelf; and muſt freely own, if it were not for theſe *Lyes*, of Gothic invention, I ſhould ſcarcely be diſpoſed to give the *Gierusalemme Liberata* a ſecond reading.

I readily agree to the lively obſervation, "That impenetrable armour, inchanted caſtles, invulnerable bodies, iron men, flying horſes, and other ſuch things, are eaſily feigned by them that dare [*a*]." But, with the obſerver's

[*a*] Mr. Hobbes's Letter.

leave

leave, not ſo feigned as we find them in the Italian poets, unleſs the writer have another quality, beſides that of courage.

One thing is true, that the ſucceſs of theſe fictions will not be great, when they have no longer any footing in the popular belief: And the reaſon is, that readers do not uſually do, as they ought, put themſelves in the circumſtances of the poet, or rather of thoſe, of whom the poet writes. But this only ſhews, that ſome ages are not ſo fit to write epic poems in, as others; not, that they ſhould be otherwiſe written.

It is alſo true, that writers do not ſucceed ſo well in painting what they have heard, as what they believe themſelves, or at leaſt obſerve in others a facility of believing. And on this account I would adviſe no modern poet to revive theſe faery tales in an epic poem.

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But ſtill this is nothing to the caſe in hand, where we are conſidering the merit of epic poems, written under other circumſtances.

The pagan Gods, and Gothic Faeries were equally out of credit, when Milton wrote. He did well therefore to ſupply their room with angels and devils. If theſe too ſhould wear out of the popular creed (and they ſeem in a hopeful way from the liberty ſome late critics have taken with them) I know not what other expedients the epic poet might have recourſe to; but this I know, the pomp of verſe, the energy of deſcription, and even the fineſt moral paintings would ſtand him in no ſtead. Without *admiration* (which cannot be effected but by the marvellous of celeſtial intervention, I mean, the agency of ſuperior natures really exiſting, or by the illuſion of the

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fancy taken to be so) no epic poem can be long-lived.

I am not afraid to instance in the Henriade itself; which, notwithstanding the elegance of the composition, will in a short time be no more read than the Gondibert of Sir W. Davenant, and for the same reason.

Critics may talk what they will of *Truth and Nature*, and abuse the Italian poets, as they will, for transgressing both in their incredible fictions. But believe it, my friend, these fictions with which they have studied to delude the world, are of that kind of creditable deceits, of which a wise antient pronounces with assurance, "*That they, "who deceive, are honester than they who "do not deceive; and they, who are de-"ceived, wiser than they who are not de-"ceived.*"

LETTER XI.

BUT you are weary of hearing so much of these exploded fancies, and are ready to ask, if there be any truth in this representation, "Whence it "has come to pass, that the classical "manners are still admired and imitated "by the poets, when the Gothic have "long since fallen into disuse?"

The answer to this question will furnish all that is now wanting to a proper discussion of the present subject.

ONE great reason of this difference certainly was, That the ablest writers of Greece ennobled the system of heroic manners, while it was fresh and flourishing; and their works, being master-pieces of composition, so fixed the credit

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credit of it in the opinion of the world, that no revolutions of time and taſte could afterwards ſhake it.

Whereas the Gothic having been diſgraced in their infancy by bad writers, and a new ſet of manners ſpringing up before there were any better to do them juſtice, they could never be brought into vogue by the attempts of later poets; who in ſpite of prejudice, and for the genuine charm of theſe highly poetical manners, did their utmoſt to recommend them.

But, FURTHER, the Gothic ſyſtem was not only forced to wait long for real genius to do it honour; real genius was even very early employed againſt it.

There were two cauſes of this miſhap. The old romancers had even outraged the

the truth in their extravagant pictures of chivalry: And Chivalry itself, such as it once had been, was greatly abated.

So that men of sense were doubly disgusted to find a representation of things *unlike* to what they observed in real life, and *beyond* what it was ever possible should have existed. However, with these disadvantages there was still so much of the old spirit left, and the fascination of these wondrous tales was so prevalent, that a more than common degree of sagacity and good sense was required to penetrate the illusion.

It was one of this character, I suppose, that put the famous question to Ariosto, which has been so often repeated that I shall spare you the disgust of hearing it. Yet long before his time an immortal genius of our own (so superior is the sense of some men to the age they

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ſive in) ſaw as far into this matter, as Arioſto's examiner. This ſagacious perſon was Dan Chaucer; who in a reign, that almoſt realized the wonders of romantic chivalry, not only diſcerned the abſurdity of the old romances, but has even ridiculed them with incomparable ſpirit.

His RIME OF SIR TOPAZ, in the Canterbury tales, is a manifeſt banter on theſe books, and may be conſidered as a ſort of prelude to the adventures of Don Quixot. I call it *a manifeſt banter*; For we are to obſerve that this was Chaucer's own tale, and that, when in the progreſs of it the good ſenſe of the Hoſt is made to break in upon him, and interrupt him, Chaucer approves his diſguſt and, changing his note, tells the ſimple inſtructive tale of Melibœus, *a moral tale virtuous*, as he chuſes to characterize

characterize it; to shew, what sort of fictions were most expressive of real life, and most proper to be put into the hands of the people.

One might further observe that the Rime of Sir Topaz itself is so managed as with infinite humour to expose the leading impertinences of books of chivalry, and their impertinencies only; as may be seen by the different conduct of this tale, from that of Cambuscan, which Spenser and Milton were so pleased with, and which with great propriety is put into the mouth of the SQUIRE.

But I must not anticipate the observations which you will take a pleasure to make for yourself on these two fine parts of the Canterbury tales. Enough is said to illustrate the point, I am now upon, "That these phantoms of

"chivalry

"chivalry had the misfortune to be "laughed out of countenance by men "of ſenſe, before the ſubſtance of it "had been fairly and truly repreſent-"ed by any capable writer."

STILL, the principal reaſon of all, no doubt, was, That the Gothic manners of Chivalry, as ſpringing out of the feudal ſyſtem, were as ſingular, as that ſyſtem itſelf: So that, when that political conſtitution vaniſhed out of Europe, the manners, that belonged to it, were no longer ſeen or underſtood. There was no example of any ſuch manners remaining on the face of the Earth: And as they never did ſubſiſt but once, and are never likely to ſubſiſt again, people would be led of courſe to think and ſpeak of them, as romantic, and unnatural. The conſequence of which was a total contempt

and

and rejection of them; while the classic manners, as arising out of the customary and usual situations of humanity, would have many archetypes, and appear natural even to those who saw nothing similar to them actually subsisting before their eyes.

Thus, tho' the manners of Homer are perhaps as different from our's, as those of Chivalry itself, yet as we know that such manners always belong to rude and simple ages, such as Homer paints; and actually subsist at this day in countries that are under the like circumstances of barbarity, we readily agree to call them *natural*, and even take a fond pleasure in the survey of them.

Your question then is easily answered, without any obligation upon me to give up the Gothic manners as villo-

naty

nary and fantaſtic. And the reaſon appears, why the *Faery Queen*, one of the nobleſt productions of modern poetry, is fallen into ſo general a neglect, that all the zeal of it's commentators is eſteemed officious and impertinent, and will never reſtore it to thoſe honours, which it has, once for all, irrecoverably loſt.

In effect, what way of perſuading the generality of readers that the romantic manners are to be accounted *natural*, when not one in ten-thouſand knows enough of the barbarous ages, in which they aroſe, to believe they ever really exiſted?

Poor Spenſer then,

— — — "in whoſe gentle ſpright
The pure well-head of Poeſie did dwell,"

muſt,

muſt, for ought I can ſee, be left to the admiration of a few lettered and curious men: While the many are ſworn together to give no quarter to the *marvellous*, or, which may ſeem ſtill harder, to the *moral* of his ſong.

However this great revolution in modern taſte was brought about by degrees; and the ſteps, that led to it, may be worth the tracing in a diſtinct Letter.

LETTER XII.

THE wonders of Chivalry were ſtill in the memory of men, were ſtill exiſting, in ſome meaſure, in real life, when Chaucer undertook to expoſe the barbarous relaters of them.

This

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This ridicule, we may suppose, hastened the fall both of Chivalry and Romance. At least from that time the spirit of both declined very fast, and at length fell into such discredit, that when now Spenser arose, and with a genius singularly fitted to immortalize the land of faery, he met with every difficulty and disadvantage to obstruct his design.

The age would no longer bear the naked letter of these amusing stories; and the poet was so sensible of the misfortune, that we find him apologizing for it on a hundred occasions.

But apologies, in such circumstances, rarely do any good. Perhaps, they only served to betray the weakness of the poet's cause, and to confirm the prejudices of his reader.

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However, he did more than this. He gave an air of mystery to his subject, and pretended that his stories of knights and giants were but the cover to abundance of profound wisdom.

In short, to keep off the eyes of the prophane from prying too nearly into his subject, he threw about it the mist of allegory: he moralized his song: and the virtues and vices lay hid under his warriours and enchanters. A contrivance which he had learned indeed from his Italian masters: For Tasso had condescended to allegorize his own work; and the commentators of Ariosto had even converted the extravagances of the Orlando Furioso, into moral lessons.

And this, it must be owned, was a sober attempt in comparison of some

I projects

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projects that were made about the same time to serve the cause of the old, and now expiring Romances. For it is to be observed, that the idolizers of these romances did by them, what the votaries of Homer had done by him. As the times improved and would less bear his strange tales, they *moralized* what they could, and turn'd the rest into mysteries of *natural science*. And as this last contrivance was principally designed to cover the monstrous stories of the *pagan Gods*, so it served the lovers of Romance to palliate the no less monstrous stories of *magic and enchantments*.

The editor, or translator of the 24th book of *Amadis de Gaule*, printed at Lyons in 1577, has a preface explaining the whole secret, which concludes with these words, "Voyla, Lecteur, le FRUIT, qui se peut recueiller du sens

mystique des Romans antiques par les ESPRITS ESLEUS, le commun peuple s'oy contentant de la SIMPLE FLEUR DE LA LECTURE LITERALE.

But to return to Spenser; who, as we have seen, had no better way to take in his distress, than to hide his faery fancies under the mystic cover of moral allegory. The only favourable circumstance that attended him (and this no doubt encouraged, if it did not produce his untimely project) was, that he was somewhat befriended in these fictions, even when interpreted according to the Letter, by the romantic Spirit of his age; much countenanced, and for a time brought into fresh credit, by the romantic Elizabeth. Her inclination for the fancies of Chivalry is well known; and obsequious wits and courtiers would not be wanting to feed and flatter it. In short, tilts and tourna-

ments

ments were in vogue. The Arcadia, and the Faery Queen were written.

With theſe helps the new Spirit of Chivalry made a ſhift to ſupport itſelf for a time, when reaſon was but dawning, as we may ſay, and juſt about to gain the aſcendant over the portentous ſpectres of the imagination. It's growing ſplendour, in the end, put them all to flight, and allowed them no quarter even amongſt the poets. So that Milton, as fond as we have ſeen he was of the Gothic fictions, durſt only admit them on the bye, and in the way of ſimile and illuſtration only.

And this, no doubt, was the main reaſon of his relinquiſhing his long-projected deſign of Prince Arthur, at laſt, for that of the Paradiſe Loſt; where, inſtead of Giants and Magicians, he had Angels and Devils to ſupply him with the

the *marvellous*, with greater probability. Yet, tho' he dropped the tales, he ſtill kept to the allegories of *Spenſer*. And even this liberty was thought too much, as appears from the cenſure paſſed on his *Sin and Death* by the ſeverer critics.

Thus at length the magic of the old romances was perfectly diſſolved. They began with reflecting an image indeed of the feudal manners, but an image magnified and diſtorted by unſkilful deſigners. Common ſenſe being offended with theſe perverſions of truth and nature (ſtill accounted the more monſtrous, as the antient manners, they pretended to copy after, were now diſuſed, and of moſt men forgotten) the next ſtep was to have recourſe to *allegories*. Under this diſguiſe they walked the world a while; the excelleſice of the moral and the ingenuity of the contrivance making ſome amends, and being accept-

ed

ed as a ſort of apology, for the abſurdity of the literal ſtory.

Under this form the tales of faery kept their ground, and even made their fortune at court; where they became, for two or three reigns, the ordinary entertainment of our princes. But reaſon, in the end, (aſſiſted however by party, and religious prejudices) drove them off the ſcene, and would endure theſe *lying wonders*, neither in their own proper ſhape, nor as maſked in figures.

Henceforth, the taſte of wit and poetry took a new turn: And *fancy*, that had wantoned it ſo long in the world of fiction, was now conſtrained, againſt her will, to ally herſelf with ſtrict truth, if ſhe would gain admittance into reaſonable company.

What

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What we have gotten by this revolution, you will ſay, is a great deal of good ſenſe. What we have loſt, is a world of fine fabling; the illuſion of which is ſo grateful to the *charmed Spirit*; that, in ſpite of philoſophy and faſhion, *Faery* Spenſer ſtill ranks higheſt among the Poets; I mean with all thoſe who are either come of that houſe, or have any kindneſs for it.

Earth-born critics, my friend, may blaſpheme,

" But all the Gods are raviſh'd with delight
" Of his celeſtial Song, and muſic's wondrous
" might."

The E N D.

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